

# **Approaches to Teaching the Language Skill of Listening: Practical and Theoretical Considerations**

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Two main approaches, based on the two fundamental processes involved in listening comprehension, are employed to teach the skill of listening to students studying English. Listening activities may be based on either “top-down” processing or “bottom-up” processing, invisible processes that occur in the brain and are the basic ways in which spoken messages are processed and understood. Top-down and bottom-up neurolinguistic processes are complementary and both are necessary in learning to understand spoken English. Effective language teaching should address both processes. In addition to these two main approaches, many other important issues related to the development of listening skills need to be addressed by language teachers. These issues include the different kinds of specific activities that can be used to develop and enhance the listening ability and comprehension level of students. Other important issues involved in listening are the importance and nature of language input, specific listening skills and strategies, and the integration of listening comprehension activities with a variety of other skills in classroom instruction.

## ***“Top-Down” and “Bottom-Up” Processing in Listening***

Students learning English or any other foreign language need to actively use a wide range of different activities that assist them in developing and significantly improving their listening ability. Littlewood (1981) states, “Listening is not a passive activity” (p. 66). Listening is part of an active and complex communicative process. McCarthy, a leading researcher in studies of discourse analysis, supports this view of the active nature of listening, and maintains “active listeners constantly predict [what they will hear next in a spoken text]” (1991, p. 2). Listening is indeed a dynamic

activity that consists simultaneously of top-down and bottom-up processing of what is heard by the listener. According to this theory of dual language processing, effective listeners employ both kinds of processing to decode and interpret what they hear.

Bottom-up processing simply means that listeners endeavor to decipher the embedded linguistic meaning in an incoming message by first carefully analyzing such basic parts of speech as individual sounds or phonemes, words and sentences. Richards (1990) asserts that listeners employ bottom-up processing when they use “incoming data as a source of information about the meaning of a message” (p. 50). Top-down processing involves the use by the listener of pre-existing background subject knowledge or “content schemata” to help him or her to understand and predict the meaning of an incoming message. Both bottom-up and top-down processing in listening can be improved by doing specific listening activities.

### ***Developing Bottom-Up Processing in Listening***

In listening involving bottom-up processing, it is likely that different learners naturally have a greater or lesser aptitude. The ability to perceive, remember and manipulate foreign sounds, matching these later visually with written symbols, is known as the “phonemic coding ability” and varies from learner to learner (Ellis, 1994, p. 496). Although some students may naturally be more skillful listeners when exposed to foreign sounds, nearly all listeners can experience some improvement in sound discrimination through regular participation in various listening activities.

A comprehensive and highly practical list of activities that can be employed by language teachers to help learners to improve bottom-up listening processing skills has been compiled by Richards. For example, students can be asked to identify the referents in a recorded conversation, to identify subjects, objects, grammatical units such as verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and to identify prepositions in rapid conversation (Richards, 1990). Students may also be asked to distinguish between positive and negative sentences.

Listening exercises can help students to practice the ability to locate the

focus on important information in a sentence, emphasizing the importance in communication of word and sentence stress. Students may hear, for example, the question “Are you going to the party downtown next week?” (The word stress is clearly placed, for example, on “next week”) and “Are you going to the park today?” (The word stress is placed on “park”). They must then circle “when” or “where” on a worksheet after listening to the word stress in the questions. A cloze test of a short recording of an authentic, current radio newsflash also presents a realistic and meaningful bottom-up processing activity for students learning to listen to and understand spoken English. For example, after listening once carefully to a newsflash, students must fill in the missing information to find out when and where an event happened. Then, after the second listening, they must answer true or false, or multiple choice questions that test their understanding of the story (Kenworthy, 1987).

Students at a beginner level especially but also on occasion students at an advanced level of English may experience difficulty simply recognizing and distinguishing between certain English sounds which may not occur in their own native language. Interference from the sound system to which they are accustomed in their native language means that they at first may not even be aware of new English sounds, categorizing these new, unfamiliar sounds as sounds that are similar in their native language (Kenworthy, 1987). Therefore, the students’ perception of English sounds must be closely examined to ensure that it is accurate. In addition to individual sounds, students also need to be familiarized with other major components of English speech such as word stress, rhythm, and intonation patterns. Students may be discouraged by their inability at first to perceive certain sounds accurately such as the initial phoneme found in the pronunciation of “the” and “they,” and to comprehend exactly what they are listening to in English. Maintaining motivation in students by encouraging them and making positive comments about their listening ability may be an important factor in the continuous development and improvement of their English listening skills.

To assist students in overcoming the problems of accurately perceiving English sounds, a wide range of different sound perception exercises may

be employed. Kenworthy (1987) maintains that such basic perceptual training exercises are necessary to “retune the ears” of foreign students, enabling them to clearly perceive new English sounds (p. 49). This “retuning” appears to complement closely the “Parameter-setting Model” of second language acquisition described by Ellis (1994), in which new features in a second language must be accommodated by resetting the parameters of the internalized knowledge of the first language (p. 453).

Sound perception activities include minimal pair exercises that employ pairs of words that are used to contrast two similar but different sounds. For example, “road” and “load” can be used to contrast the distinct English phonemes /l/ and /r/ for Japanese native-speakers who often experience great difficulty distinguishing between these two sounds that are allophones of the same phoneme in their native language. The difference between voiced (i.e. with vibrating vocal cords) and non-voiced consonants (for example, the contrast between “the” and “thick”) is yet another area of difficulty for many students of English. Minimal pairs and contrasted consonants may be presented to the students on a worksheet. Students then listen carefully to a tape recording and circle the pronounced word on their worksheet. These sounds may also be identified by students in the more realistic context of a recorded dialogue. A tape recorder is appropriate in such listening exercises since the identical model can be replayed again to give students another opportunity to check their selections (Haycraft, 1978). Students can also be given worksheets on which they must mark the correct order of the words that they hear on a tape recording. For example, the students may hear “bit,” “beat,” “bite” and must order these correctly on their worksheet. As well, they may listen to a series of words and identify the “odd one out” with a different sound. For example, they might hear the word “shoe” three times and the name “Sue” and must correctly identify the last word as being different (Kenworthy, 1987).

Consciousness raising and sound perception skills can be further practiced by requiring students to write down the words that they hear during a traditional dictation. This kind of exercise is useful for improving the students’ ability to distinguish between consonant clusters (i.e. groups of consonants in English words such as “ch” and “st”). Students can be

given a sheet with partially formed words such as “ea—.” When the teacher reads the words “east” and “each,” the students must complete the word on their sheet according to what they have heard. Another sound perception activity involves having the students listen to a story or dialogue and counting the number of times a particular sound, such as the vowel sound in “cut,” occurs (Kenworthy, 1987). A variety of listening games can be used as well, especially with younger students to improve listening and to increase motivation. For example, a bingo game using flash cards of various objects and words to check sound perception can make listening practice more enjoyable. Each student is given the same amount of flash cards of objects and words in English and must identify these when the teacher calls them out. The first student to identify a complete row of flash cards can be declared the winner (Littlewood, 1981).

Many reference works are available to help teachers to anticipate in advance the particular listening problems that students from particular first-language backgrounds are likely to encounter in English. Among these, *Learner English: A teacher's guide to interference and other problems* (Swan & Smith, 1987) is perhaps one of the most comprehensive. This detailed reference work contains a highly practical and concise summary of the typical problem areas of many different major language groups in listening to and pronouncing English. Each language has its own section devoted to specific and typical problem areas in English phonology, details of particular problems with the production and perception of English consonants, vowels, syllable structures, word linking, word and sentence stress, rhythm, and intonation. Such detailed information is useful to the teacher because it can be used as a checklist that may provide a basis for the creation of effective bottom-up processing activities for specific groups of first-language speakers.

### ***Developing Top-Down Processing in Listening***

Top-down listening processing can be developed, for example, by having students listen to a conversation concerning various pictures that they must match to different parts of the conversation. The students can also be asked to identify the setting and location of a conversation. They can

first read relevant information on a given area before listening to a conversation to determine if it contains any of the information which they have just read. In yet another activity, students can read one half of a dialogue and then try to guess the content of the other half before listening to the original recording of the dialogue to check their predictions and perhaps confirm their expectations. A similar activity involves looking at photographs or cartoons of people speaking. Students can try to guess what the characters or people are saying by analyzing non-linguistic clues such as facial expressions, gestures, and the location before listening to the actual recording of the conversation (Richards, 1990).

The ability of the listener to make various inferences based on the input he or she receives plays an important role in top-down processing. Richards (1990) notes that other examples of exercises that promote the practice of top-down listening are those which require the listener to “use key words to construct the schema of a discourse,” to “infer the outcome of an event,” to “infer the unstated details of a situation,” to “infer the sequence of a series of events,” and to “distinguish between facts and opinions” (p. 60).

### ***The Importance and Nature of Language Input in Listening***

Krashen (1981) employed the term “comprehensible input” to describe language that clearly challenges but does not overtax a student’s current English ability, and this concept also applies to listening. Krashen’s input hypothesis states “learners must understand the input which contains new language...understanding comes from contextual and non-linguistic clues” (p. 84). An extended period of quiet reflection may also be required by the learner in which he or she only listens to input without responding. Learners sometimes require additional reflection time in order to process large quantities of new listening input.

The implication of these ideas is that the more students are exposed to language and engaged in everyday listening practice in a variety of natural and authentic contexts, the better their listening skills will become. The natural learning process can be accelerated if students are provided with the additional benefit of some sound perception training. Students should be actively encouraged to listen to English language radio and television

broadcasts as much as possible to improve their listening skills and to keep them finely tuned. Small short wave radios present a relatively inexpensive way to receive international English language broadcasts from sources such as the B.B.C. and the official English language radio news services of many other countries, including some non-English speaking countries. English satellite and cable television services such as C.N.N. are also worthy investments in English. The Internet now provides a wide range of English media sources, including web television, video archives, radio, newsgroups, article databases, language resources, chat rooms, blogs, podcasts, and a growing list of innovative multimedia combinations.

The type of listening input students receive should be extremely varied, reflecting the wide variety of registers, styles, accents, and dialects that are now present in the English speaking world. Learners require exposure to authentic spoken texts in addition to carefully rehearsed recorded dialogues. Learners should be made aware of all of the features of spoken English such as hesitating devices, rephrasing, repetition, and many others in everyday, natural speech (Littlewood, 1981). An increased awareness and familiarity with such features will increase the confidence levels of students and help them to cope with listening to native-speakers. Scripts of recordings of authentic real-life interviews can help students to perceive difficult passages, building their confidence before listening to a recording without the aid of a script. The degree of difficulty of any listening task can be controlled by manipulating the input in different ways. For example, a recording can be played once or several times, there may be background noise or not, the speed of the recording can also be adjusted and visual or textual clues can be given to the students to adjust the difficulty of listening tasks.

In selecting input for the students, it should not be forgotten that there are different kinds of purposes for listening, involving both transactional and interactional listening. Ideally, a detailed needs analysis should be conducted to determine the exact listening needs of the students (Richards, 1985). Transactional listening involves the communication of real messages that serve a specific, practical purpose in, for example, business situations and purchase transactions. Interactional listening is used in social

interaction to, for example, express empathy with a speaker (McCarthy, 1991). There are numerous reasons and possible contexts for listening that should be presented to students. Listening can take place face to face with a native-speaker or on the telephone, as an eavesdropper to conversation on a bus, as a student in a lecture, and so on. A wide range of common listening situations need to be accounted for when selecting materials or designing listening activities (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). The all pervasive presence of English lyrics in international pop music and music videos has meant that, to varying degrees and with few exceptions, virtually the entire non-English speaking world has been subjected to some level of comprehensible English input.

### ***Developing Effective Listening Skills and Strategies***

McDonough and Shaw divide listening skills into the three sub-categories of “sound processing,” “meaning processing,” and “making use of context and knowledge” (1993, p. 133). The first category corresponds with bottom-up processing, the second category with the intermediate stage of basic meaning processing, and the third category with top-down processing. Meaning processing is an intermediate stage in which the sounds that have been perceived and translated into words and sentences are used to construct a meaningful message that is retained in the short-term memory while the exact, original syntax is often forgotten (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Detailed taxonomies of essential listening skills have been compiled to assist researchers and language teachers (Richards, 1985; Rost, 1990). The taxonomy compiled by Richards addresses the micro-skills of conversational and academic listening separately. The skills described by Richards range from “the ability to discriminate between the distinctive sounds of the target language” (bottom-up processing) to “the ability to distinguish between literal and implied meanings” (top-down processing). Rost divides his taxonomy into “enabling skills” (i.e. strategies that help one to listen) such as “identifying the use of stress and pitch in connected speech, unit boundaries” and “enacting skills” (i.e. different ways of responding effectively to what one has heard) (Rost, 1990). Such detailed taxonomies of listening skills can serve as useful checklists for the language



teacher when performing a needs analysis or planning the listening component of a course.

Students should be advised on the use of simple strategies to make their listening skills more effective. For example, students should be taught how to ask for repetition or to make confirmation checks. They can also be given practice listening to key words in texts such as news reports in order to answer important basic questions such as when and where a given event has occurred. Students need to learn to avoid panicking when they hear a section of a spoken text that they do not completely understand, especially in the context of a “live” conversation on a telephone in which useful paralinguistic features are missing. Students need to be made aware of the fact that there is a certain level of redundancy and repetition in spoken English. This means that it is still possible to understand the overall, global meaning of a message without having understood every single item contained in the message. Students must learn to relax when listening. Being too tense and nervous impedes their ability to focus clearly on the meaning of the message. To help build confidence in their listening ability, listening activities should sometimes be given which are not graded, thereby removing some of the stress from listening to English in the class. Students requiring English for specific purposes, such as listening to lectures, need to be trained on how to use important strategies such as efficient note-taking.

Role plays and typical telephone exchanges encountered by the students can be practiced, familiarizing them with the genres or particular culturally specific structures of specific spoken text types (McCarthy, 1991). An increased familiarity with certain spoken genres of English helps the students to become more active listeners, to more accurately predict the direction of a conversation, and to listen more efficiently.

### ***The Integration of Listening with Other Skills***

Underwood (1989) maintains that effective listening exercises should be preceded by a “pre-listening” activity that serves to activate the students’ background knowledge of a subject, preparing them for what they will be listening to (p. 28). Pre-listening activities are meant to activate “content

schemata” and this can be achieved, for example, by using other skills such as reading a short introductory passage or by first discussing the topic of the listening. Listening practice can be integrated smoothly and naturally with speaking, reading, and writing in meaningful, contextualized exercises and tasks that reflect real life situations. Listening shares many points in common with the skill of reading. McDonough and Shaw assert that both listeners and readers are actively involved in “guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting and organizing” (1993, p. 128). Listening and reading both require the same basic kinds of bottom-up and top-down processing to decode and interpret messages (Silberstein, 1994). These similarities make a smooth integration of different language skills possible. The traditional four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking do not have to be treated as completely distinct and separate since they are often closely woven together in the daily life of native-speakers. For example, a person may first discuss a shopping list with other people, listen to their suggestions, take notes, and then later read the list in the supermarket while shopping. In this way, speaking, listening, writing, and reading are combined naturally to accomplish a specific task in a natural, everyday context.

An important relationship exists between listening and speaking. These two language skills are clearly interdependent in any normal conversation (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). A strong argument may be presented for the integration of the four skills. Listening is an interactive skill that often requires minimal responses on the part of the listener such as “Mm,” “I see,” etc. Such minimal responses often play an essential role in the maintenance of a conversation. The students’ attention can be drawn to such features by using scripts and authentic recordings. Role plays can then be used in which students are encouraged to make appropriate responses as an active listener.

Pronunciation exercises as well as speaking practice can be integrated effectively into listening activities. Students that are able to accurately produce a certain sound themselves may be more likely to be able to perceive that sound when they are listening to other people. Pronunciation practice makes students more aware of the subtle differences between

certain sounds in English, improving their ability to discriminate between sounds that are very similar, helping them to avoid confusing certain words.

In conclusion, the language skill of listening, which has traditionally been viewed as a purely passive skill, is actually a highly interactive skill in many respects. Listening involves two main types of processing known as bottom-up and top-down processing, both of which are used to different degrees depending on the level of the student and the nature of the listening task. Listening is used frequently in conjunction with speaking but also in combination with reading and writing to accomplish different tasks. The phenomenon of minimal response, important in the maintenance and successful conclusion of many conversations, reveals the close link between listening and speaking and the active nature of the listener's role in a conversation. A close relationship is also evident between listening and reading, since both skills employ the same kind of linguistic processing. Listening is an active skill that requires large amounts of input, the teaching and practice of various effective listening strategies, and integration with other language skills in a wide range of realistic contexts.

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